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Race, Circulation, and the City: The Case of the Chicago City Sticker Controversy

Abstract: The city sticker controversy began when an anonymous, openly racist blog accused a Latino boy of smuggling gang imagery into his contest-winning design for the 2012 Chicago vehicle sticker. It continued when mainstream media outlets repeatedly cited the blog's accusations without acknowledging its racism. I argue that a form of circulation that contains bodies of color and promotes the mobility of other bodies helped to secure the credibility of the blog's claims, consolidating the association of bodies of color with gang violence. I explore the relationships among the processes and practices of urban circulation, race, digital media, and mainstream media.

Keywords: Blogs; Circulation; Gangs; Space

In 1995, the City of Chicago began holding an annual contest asking Chicago students to submit original, hand-drawn designs to be selected by vote to become the official design for the city vehicle sticker that Chicago car owners are required to display on their windshields. In late 2011, a fifteen-year-old Latino boy from a Chicago public school won the contest and a \$1,000 bond. By February 2012, City Clerk Susana Mendoza revoked his prize because of accusations that his design contained covert gang imagery. In April 2012, the city released an in-house design because the runner-up, wishing to avoid controversy, refused to have her design displayed. In April 2013, the city announced it would no longer hold a design contest.¹ The original winning hand-drawn design (figure 1) features a heart framing Chicago's skyline with the red stars and blue stripes of the Chicago flag soaring above the centrally placed Willis Tower. Above the heart, four hands, each of a slightly different skin hue, point their fingers and thumbs to the sky as they toss into the air a police hat, a firefighter helmet, and the Star of Life, the symbol of emergency response vehicles. Below the heart, the words "Chicago's Heroes" appear in blue. The controversy about this design, which began on a blog before

spreading to newspapers, radio, other blogs, and television programs, was that the hands in the winning design depicted—or appeared to depict—the “pitchfork” hand symbol that serves as a gang sign of the Maniac Latin Disciples, a notorious Chicago gang that also uses hearts as symbols.



Figure 1. From Wile.

This essay examines the career of the city sticker controversy, beginning with the anonymous blog Detective ShavedLongCock, which can be found at

www.shavedlongcock.blogspot.com (hereafter *ShavedLongCock*), and the conspicuous omission of an accurate description of that blog despite its repeated citation in subsequent coverage in the local and national media. Media reports cited the blog as a “cop blog with a dirty name,” a blog “about police issues,” a blog “popular with police,” and other similar euphemisms, but never gave its full title or acknowledged its blatant racism, which includes referring to black women as wildebeests, describing Latinos as illegal beaners, and declaring, “When Colored Folks Get Together ... Nothing good happens” in its headlines. As a result of this euphemistic citation, an anonymously authored and racist blog intervened in an institutionalized rhetorical practice of representing Chicago through its city sticker, turning the celebration of a young Latino artist into a condemnation of young people of color as potential gang members.

The mainstream media’s citation-by-omission of *ShavedLongCock* tapped into existing racial formations that associate Latino youth with gang membership and thus with gang rhetoric. Fears of contaminating gang rhetoric infiltrating the city sticker and moving unimpeded in the urban milieu generated the city sticker controversy. I argue, then, that the indirect citation of *ShavedLongCock*’s post both drew on and consolidated existing racial formations that contain bodies of color within the city. Understanding *ShavedLongCock*’s indirect citation requires turning to historical and theoretical approaches to the city as an urban milieu, or an interconnected network of bodies, commodities, vehicles, and waste, that calls for careful management in order to promote healthy circulation. To explicate the controversy, I conduct a cartography of power, tracing how gangs, ghettos, and dominant approaches to the urban milieu reflect and reactivate racial formations.

As the city sticker controversy reveals, the networked yet disparate and diffuse fragments composing contemporary culture exert rhetorical force as they assemble to sustain formations of power. To understand the rhetorical force of the city sticker controversy first requires attending to the relationship between circulation and racialization in the city. This cartography of power can uncover the fragmented articulations among gangs, ghettos, and the management of the urban milieu. I then examine *ShavedLongCock*'s citation-by-omission in mainstream media, demonstrating how fears of gangs and ghettoized bodies moving throughout the urban milieu gave the controversy its force. I describe the history of the urban milieu in Chicago, sketching the contours of the circulatory channels making this citation-by-omission possible and rhetorically powerful. I then return to the present moment by examining how gang rhetoric moves through digital and material circulatory networks, and how the fear of this movement contributed to the force of the controversy. I conclude by considering how in a diffuse, decentered, and destabilized media environment, the rhetorical situation increasingly involves a complex array of articulations. This fragmentation calls for renewed attention to the linkages among elements as they circulate in networks and consolidate into formations of power.

Cartographies of Power: Racialization, Circulation, and Fragmentation

The case of the city sticker controversy and the forms of racism it drew upon and consolidated cannot be explained by describing the actions of any one agent or group of agents: not the media, which sought with limited success to stir moral panic; nor City Clerk Susana Mendoza, who grew up on the city's southwest side amid gang violence

and whose decision it ultimately was to revoke the prize; and not even *ShavedLongCock*'s author, an open and dedicated racist. To be sure, *ShavedLongCock*'s argument that the city sticker contained gang imagery initially sparked the city sticker controversy. However, as I demonstrate below, there is little evidence to suggest that the argument itself was persuasive. Yet the mere circulation in digital and mainstream media of an implied connection between the young Latino contest winner and gang imagery—and the implications of that connection for the circulation of gang imagery in the city itself—was enough for *ShavedLongCock*'s blog post to exert its force. The case of the city sticker controversy thus raises the question of how rhetoric exerts force without persuading.

Pursuing such a question requires updating existing models of rhetorical inquiry and equipping them for a networked world, one in which images, texts, objects, and bodies circulate in mediated and material spaces. At least since Michael Calvin McGee called for attention to the fragmentation of contemporary culture, scholars of rhetoric have sought to develop a theory of the materiality of rhetoric as it relates to the circulation of ideas, discourses, and bodies. One approach coalesces around calls for scholars to develop a “cartography of power,” to draw a map of the articulations and linkages among the various nodes that together constitute our networked relations (Greene 22). This method suggests an emphasis on the spatial arrangement of power. Scholars have uncovered the rhetorical dimensions of particular places and localized spaces, including museums, monuments, malls, and more (see, for example, Zagacki and Gallagher, Blair and Michel, and Stewart and Dickinson). It is important, however, not to lose sight of rhetoric in motion. Replacing a model of space and place with a focus on

networks and circulation can account for the ways in which rhetorical texts, images, objects, and bodies move, travel, and indeed get stuck. To account for the exertion of rhetorical force through rhetorical circulation, cartographies of power must track and trace the cultural, ideological, and material fragments McGee described as they combine, dissolve, and recombine in circulatory networks.

Here I track a series of fragments as they consolidate a cartography of power that sustains a dominant racial formation governing the shape of urban life in the United States, promoting urban mobility for some at the expense of containment for others. In short, I am interested in the relationship between circulation and racialization. Describing this relationship requires sketching the contours of various fragments, including blog posts, mainstream media reporting, gang rhetoric, and the notion of the urban milieu, which has long sustained a dominant approach to modern urban planning that seeks to manage urban circulation by promoting the movement of some at the expense of the containment of others. Circulation thus provides the circuitry through which rhetorical fragments flow, but it also shapes the form those fragments take. Conducting a cartography of power analysis can reveal how these flowing fragments gather force. A cartography of power, then, is at once a rhetorical method—a means of sketching the articulations among flowing fragments—and a name for the rhetorical force exerted as fragments assemble into formations of power. Cartographies of power are not only discovered in rhetorical analyses, they are also produced through rhetorical articulations.

I emphasize circulation because it captures the ways in which rhetoric exerts force within a cartography of power. As globalization has made circulation an increasingly important object of study, circulation has become increasingly important to rhetorical

inquiry. Scholars have examined the circulation of texts through variously formulated networks, and thinkers such as Bruno Latour have been influential in encouraging the study of the networked relationship among various actors, both human and nonhuman, symbolic and material, digital and analog (Rice 5). Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma argue that circulation and exchange are “constitutive acts in themselves” that involve both the movement of peoples, ideas, and commodities and the establishment of “interpretive communities” that flourish with these material movements, creating symbolic and material “cultures of circulation” (192). Mary E. Stuckey combines Lee’s and LiPuma’s insights with McGee’s and others’ to argue for the centrality of the “logics of circulation” to the practice of rhetorical criticism, suggesting a focus not only on the fact of circulation but on the “logics,” practices, and cultural performances that accompany material movement (609). Timothy Barney’s study of how the circulation of Cold War-era disease maps also served to “shape the abstract ground on which the Cold War was fought” and promote economic development is one example of such “logics of circulation” at work (25).

However, circulation is not only about textual artifacts, and its impact does not only resonate in interpretive communities and abstract spaces. Circulation is also a material and embodied performance in space. Circulatory systems frame and provide rhetorical resources for performances of all sorts: a street and its reputation, for example, can exert influence on traffic patterns, policing, and the public behavior of residents, shop owners, pedestrians, passersby, and travelers-through. Circulation thus sustains what Jenny Edbauer Rice has called a rhetorical ecology, a network not only of “effects, enactments, and events” but also images, texts, objects, and bodies (9). It is important to

emphasize that circulation is never merely unfettered movement; circulatory networks provide channels of various sorts (fiber-optic cables, interstate highways, and overseas shipping routes) that make movement possible by constraining it. The circulatory process makes the movement of certain objects possible by containing the movement of other objects. When it comes to circulation, then, containment is as important as movement. To examine how rhetoric exerts its force amid fragmentation, the movements of fragmented texts, images, objects, and bodies must be examined along with the channels through which they move or in which they get stuck. This approach requires a focus that combines attention to abstract and material forms of circulation.

In the case of the Chicago city sticker controversy, the circulatory channels include digital media, mainstream media, and the material space of the city itself. In cities in the United States in general, racialization is a key technique of containment in circulatory systems. A clarifying example that impinges on the forthcoming analysis is the urban ghetto. The ghetto is a product of a long history of city planning focused on managing circulation in the urban milieu. Containing purportedly dangerous or undesirable bodies in the ghetto secures the movement of other bodies. When bodies are forced into ghettos, the symbolic association of those bodies with danger only increases, turning the ghetto into an abstract symbol of danger and decay. The material space and abstract symbol of the ghetto apply force in tandem to contain bodies in the urban milieu. The ghetto is thus a racial formation, a term Michael Omi and Howard Winant use to describe how “social, economic and political forces determine the content of racial meanings” and structures (75). As a material space that contains racialized bodies, the ghetto is indeed a racial formation, but it is important to emphasize that the ghetto is

never a finished product. Racial formations are always in production, part of an ongoing process that shape the material city and understandings of it.

Indeed, ghettos are not sustained through the structure of the city alone. The mediated channels through which images and texts move can affect the material channels through which bodies and object move. This connection surfaces in the figure of the gang member. Within the racialized urban milieu, the gang member is always a figure, a symbol for something else: a symptom of danger, a threat to be contained, and indeed a node in a shadow channel of circulation. Gang members, after all, rely upon a whole symbolic repertoire of images and texts—from graffiti to gang signs—that move through an illicit communicative network that threatens licit communicative networks. Moreover, gang rhetoric circulates in digital as well as material spaces. The racial formations that structure physical space—seeking, for example, to suppress gang rhetoric—also structure interactions on digital media platforms. In her analysis of digital white flight, for example, danah boyd argues that “the same underlying factors that shaped city dwellers’ exodus to the suburbs” also pushed some white teenagers from MySpace—increasingly seen as “too ghetto”—to Facebook (boyd 206). Bodies thus move in digital space through the same formations that structure circulation in physical space. As boyd’s analysis suggests, digital media are never *only* digital. They exist in a broader mediated ecology where the lines between digital space and material space and digital media and traditional media are never clear. The city sticker controversy exerted its force within just such a complex ecology, one that included gang imagery and the fear of it, the online sharing of blog posts, the citation of those blog posts in traditional and mainstream media outlets, and the urban milieu as a racialized means of regulating urban circulation.

A cartography of power tracks how disparate and diffuse fragments combine and consolidate in circulatory channels to exercise rhetorical force. Although scholars continue to respond to the fragmentation of contemporary culture by searching for fragments beyond the persuasive rhetor in previously unlooked for places and spaces and previously unnoticed nonhuman actors and objects, it is important not only to describe rhetoric beyond the rhetor but to account for the ways in which rhetoric deploys its force in formations of power. The case of the Chicago city sticker controversy reflects how the fear of the racialized bodies of gang members moving unimpeded in the urban milieu made it possible for the openly racist blog *ShavedLongCock* to spark a controversy that spread in the mainstream media.

The Case of the City Sticker Controversy

In what follows, I argue that the indirect citation of *ShavedLongCock* purged its racism from coverage of the controversy, allowing its discourse to fold into an existing racial formation that purportedly protects citywide circulation yet does so by promoting the containment of bodies of color. My analysis of the city sticker controversy begins with the initial reportage on February 7, 2012, and ends with the city's announcement on April 18, 2012 that it would release its own in-house sticker. The city sticker controversy received wide coverage. Chicago's two major newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, ran stories on the controversy, as did the *Fox*, *CBS*, *NBC*, and *ABC* local Chicago affiliate stations. The Chicago network *WGN-TV*, the Chicago public radio station *WBEZ*, and the *Chicago Magazine* all covered the story. The controversy was also widely discussed on blogs about Chicago, including *Gaper's Block*, *Extra News*, the

Expired Meter, *Newshocker*, *Chicagoist*, and *Northside Lou*. On the national level, the *Associated Press*, *NPR*, *CNN*, *Time Magazine*, and the *Huffington Post* covered the story.

Although the national coverage of this local story clearly indicates that it circulated widely, my interest is not in the textual circulation of the original blog post as such but in how the citation-by-omission of *ShavedLongCock* in the mainstream press activated an existing racial formation. Since no mainstream media outlet directly linked to or named *ShavedLongCock*, the controversy did not generate significant changes in the blog's readership. Indeed, the blog has been inoperative for some time now and has been for sale since October 2012. My focus, then, is on tracking how the mainstream media increasingly attributed credibility to *ShavedLongCock* as an expert commentator on gang issues at the same time that the blog continued to publish racist posts. The fear of gang imagery infiltrating the official Chicago city sticker obscured *ShavedLongCock's* virulent, obvious, and easily discredited racism. In other words, fears of racialized bodies moving unimpeded in the urban milieu secured credibility for *ShavedLongCock's* argument.

It is important to emphasize that a number of critiques of the controversy and the city's decision to revoke the prize were published. *CNN* journalist Anderson Cooper mocked the decision with his "RidicuList" segment, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* both ran editorials criticizing the city for its decision to revoke the prize, and an undergraduate student newspaper, the *Daily Northwestern*, criticized the city's overreaction. The *Chicago Magazine* questioned whether the design in fact contained gang imagery, arguing that it is possible to find gang signs almost anywhere. Posts on the blogs *Gaper's Block* and *Northside Lou* both directly acknowledged the

overt racism on the blog and criticized mainstream news organizations for using it as a source, with *Northside Lou* writing “The name of his blog is Detective Shaved Long Cock. Again. Detective. Shaved. Long. Cock ... To give this blog a voice ... is shameful” (14). Yet not a single mainstream source acknowledged the virulent racism of *ShavedLongCock* in its coverage of the controversy or even in its editorial criticism of the media’s handling of the controversy. Although I focus on tracking the mainstream media’s citation-by-omission of *ShavedLongCock*, my purpose is not to castigate the media for their “shameful” practices, as Northside Lou would have it. Instead, I track the citation-by-omission in order to explore a basic question: How was it so easy for this award for civic merit to devolve into an accusation of gang membership? I claim that extant discourses of circulation and spatial practices dedicated to containing the movement of racialized bodies helped to establish the credibility of *ShavedLongCock*’s claims. Eventually, *ShavedLongCock* was cited as a “cop blog,” but the blog’s discourse emanates not so much from one person or even one profession as it does from a diffuse yet already articulated set of ideas, practices, and actions that promote the containment of racialized bodies in urban space. These ideas, practices, and actions form a racial formation that coheres around the notion of the urban milieu as a theoretical idea and material practice of managing circulation. Before exploring this claim in more detail, though, it is necessary to focus on how the mainstream media granted credibility to *ShavedLongCock*’s claims and, consequently, how *ShavedLongCock*’s citation-by-omission drew on and consolidated an existing racial formation.

The post on *ShavedLongCock* that initially generated the controversy emphasized the heart framing the Chicago skyline, arguing that “The HEART is the major MLD

Gang Symbol,” MLD being the Maniac Latin Disciples, a national gang with a strong presence in Chicago (“Saw this on FB” 1).² The post then turns attention to the hands, writing, “Look closely at the fingers. ... The 1st finger in front of the 2nd finger with the thumb extended back, ... it’s the pitchfork sign. A normal drawing of the hand would not have each 1st finger extended past the 2nd finger” (“Saw this on FB” 1). The blog supports this interpretation with images from the designer’s Facebook page, including an image of him blowing smoke from his mouth, an image of him wearing a red bandana (a color that the blog erroneously claims “is a trademark” of the Maniac Latin Disciples), and an image of two people with blurred-out faces who are making the Maniac Latin Disciples gang sign by “throwing the crown down while throwing the pitchfork up” (“Saw this on FB” 1). There are a number of problems with the blog’s argument, and an image from the website of the *Chicago Sun-Times* showing the designer’s mother juxtaposing the hands of the winning design with nearly identical hands from a motivational poster (figure 2) seems to offer the strongest proof that the designer was not copying a gang sign but rather relying on a template completely unrelated to gangs to guide his drawing.



Figure 2. From Janssen and Spielman.

Nevertheless, my purpose is not to assess the accuracy of *ShavedLongCock*'s interpretation because such concerns did not enter fully into the controversy. Instead, *ShavedLongCock* and its racism warrant analysis because news sources ignored the racism while citing the blog and because the blog continued espousing racism for the duration of the coverage of the controversy. The blog's motto is "True News Mixed with Cop Humor; Straight, In-Depth, and To-the-Point," and it primarily runs editorialized headlines for existing news stories (Detective). *ShavedLongCock* routinely posted racist headlines during the entire coverage of the city sticker controversy, from February 7 to April 18, 2012. If any journalists who cited it went to the original source, they could not have missed the blog's visible and virulent racism. One of the most pernicious, blatant, and commonplace racial slurs on *ShavedLongCock* is the description of black women as wildebeests. Examples of this description from headlines include "Spitting at cop lands nasty black wildebeest in West Side Lockup" from February 16, 2012; "Brawl Between Two Black Wildebeests Leads to Head-Smashing" from April 6, 2012; and "Chicago colored welfare wildebeest [sic] mom charged with brutalizing 11-month-old son in 'bout of frustration'" from April 22, 2012. The wildebeest title implies that all black women are potentially violent. This is clear from the comments under the April 16, 2012 headline, "Wildebeest Named 'Fellony' arrested for felony battery—Her name should be Fellony Ugly!" The first comment on the post mocks what the commentator apparently takes to be an African American vernacular accent, stating, "OOoowwwwweeeeee, dat sho beez uglee!" The next comment ominously states, "You need a rifle for a

Wildebeest.” These headlines all position black women as potentially violent threats in need of containment.

Throughout the controversy, the blog consistently used racial epithets to describe people of color as potentially violent and dangerous and thus in need of containment. A March 26, 2012, headline states, “Slanty Eyed Suspect in quintuple murders should have been previously deported, ICE says.” Given that the city sticker controversy centered on the portrayal of a young Latino boy as a potential gangster, the blog’s portrayal of Latinos is particularly relevant. Without exception, the blog refers to Latinos as beaners, and frequently as illegal beaners. A sample of headlines includes the February 16, 2012 headline, which states, in all capital letters, “HORNY HOMO ILLEGAL BEANER TRIES TO GRAB YOUNG BOY”; the March 15, 2012 headline that reads, “Illegal Beaner blown to smithereens—U.S. Border Patrol agent burned as car in chase explodes”; the March 28, 2012 headline, “Illegal Beaner Shalimar Santiago who is also a street gang member gets 54 years for ramming SUV, killing IUC student”; and the April 11, 2012 headline, “‘Illegal Beaner Chitling brings 50 bags of Heroin for his classroom ‘Show & Tell.’” The latter “illegal beaner” is a five-year-old boy. All Latinos—five-year-olds, fifteen-year-olds, and adults—are “illegal beaners” according to *ShavedLongCock*. And in a February 27, 2012 headline published during the height of the controversy, *ShavedLongCock* declares, “Colored Folks and Illegal Beaners who are Chicago gang bangers are getting pushed out of the city, into western suburbs.”

Each of these headlines emphasizes the purported violence of bodies of color and the inevitable spread of that violence throughout the city and even the suburbs beyond. Although *ShavedLongCock*’s name and descriptions of its racism were omitted from

mainstream coverage of the city sticker controversy, the blog's racism and the racial formation that set the conditions for the controversy differ in their expression but not in their function. Mainstream media sources and city officials do not make the blatantly racist claims *ShavedLongCock* does—and, to be clear, I am not suggesting that they secretly harbor similarly racist attitudes—but containing bodies of color is both the goal of the blog and the effect of the racial formation that the blog draws on and consolidates.

This similarity in function in part explains how such a racist blog became the source of the controversy. On February 7, 2012, *CBS Chicago* reported, “a number of police blogs claimed the design displayed gang signs.” The words “a number of police blogs” in the *CBS Chicago* online story formed a hyperlink that directed to a post from the blog *Second City Cop*. The first words after the headline of the linked *Second City Cop* post were “Shaved has a helluva post up this afternoon.” These words in turn formed a hyperlink to the original *ShavedLongCock* post accusing the young designer of smuggling gang imagery into his winning design. The first lines of the *Second City Cop* post clearly credited *ShavedLongCock* as the original source identifying a perceived link between the city sticker design and gang imagery. To be sure, *CBS Chicago* never named *ShavedLongCock* as a source. However, by referring to a “number of police blogs” (as opposed to just one), citing *Second City Cop*, and linking to a story whose first words links directly to *ShavedLongCock*, *CBS Chicago* indirectly cited *ShavedLongCock* as a “police blog,” extending credibility both to *Second City Cop* and *ShavedLongCock*. Following these hyperlinks—which requires only two clicks from the *CBS Chicago* story—reveals that *ShavedLongCock* originally generated the controversy.

Of course, a mainstream source hyperlinking to a blog is not in itself rare in a media environment. Indeed, the blog is not a definable genre but “a technology, a medium, a constellation of affordance,” and here *CBS Chicago* uses the hyperlink—a key technology in blogging—to continue a conversation that a blogger began (Miller and Shepherd 283). In this case, the “constellation of forces” includes those forces actively campaigning to consolidate racial formations.

Although there are subtler racist overtones on *Second City Cop*, the racism of *ShavedLongCock* is ubiquitous and virulent, and it was so blatant during the city sticker coverage that it would have been impossible to miss.³ Yet the rampant racism of *ShavedLongCock* goes unmentioned, and *ShavedLongCock* becomes a credible “police blog” even though it and *Second City Cop* are anonymously authored, making it difficult to ascertain whether the authors are in fact employed as police. It was thus not the credibility of the author but the articulation between gangs and policing and the fear of racialized bodies interrupting urban circulation that established the persona of “police blog” for *ShavedLongCock*. Although *CBS Chicago* immediately granted credibility to *ShavedLongCock* by calling it a “police blog,” the transference of credibility to the blog underwent a subtler movement in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The first *Chicago Tribune* story on the controversy, which ran on February 8, 2012, traced the provenance of the controversy to “a blogger who writes about police issues” and who “identified the position of those hands as symbols often flashed by a notorious Chicago street gang” (Dardick and Byrne 4). By vaguely describing the blog as being “about police issues,” the article associated the blog with the Chicago Police Department, lending it legitimacy in the process. The article later cited the opinion of Jody Weis,

former police superintendent and then-chairman of the nonprofit Chicago Crime Commission, who initially thought that the hands did not look like a gang sign when he “saw the imagery on a Blackberry,” but when “he blew the image up on an iPad, he could see it much clearer and he changed his mind. ‘It’s very, very close to a gang sign,’” Weis was quoted as saying (Dardick and Byrne 10).

This article encapsulates the transference of credibility to *ShavedLongCock* that would play itself out over the next two months. First, the article granted the blog credibility because it wrote about police issues, but not because it was an official police blog. Then, only a few paragraphs later, the opinion of a former police superintendent buttressed the opinion of the blog, and *ShavedLongCock* gained further credibility through direct association with the former superintendent in the article. The formation of Weis’s opinion mirrored the transference of credibility. At first, Weis was uncertain about the gang signs, but when he enlarged the image he convinced himself that the hands were at least *potentially* gang signs. The fear of gang imagery circulating in the city overwhelmed Weis’s doubts, and his claim obscured *ShavedLongCock*’s overt racism; instead, the subtler articulation between racialized bodies, gangs, and the urban milieu took precedence.

The next day, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a follow-up story that summarized the controversy:

In less than 24 hours, the teen’s sticker was felled by a cop blog with a dirty name and a Facebook page that left some questions about the winner. On Tuesday afternoon, the blog pointed out what the writer saw as similarities between hands the boy drew into his sticker and a hand sign

associated with a gang. By Tuesday evening, Mendoza said she was looking into the matter. (“Boy, 15” 9)

The *Chicago Tribune* euphemistically referred to the blog as having a “dirty name,” a formulation which, although likely motivated by a practical desire not to offend a general readership, would also seem to undermine the blog’s claim to credibility. At the same time, however, the blog had also gone from being a blog “about police issues” in a February 8 *Chicago Tribune* story to a “cop blog” in the February 9 *Chicago Tribune* story. In other words, the latter story placed the blog as itself a product of the police. That the blog had a dirty name did not undermine its credibility because, as *ShavedLongCock*’s motto suggests, “cop humor” accompanies the dangerous and important work of the police, who often deal with the pressures of their work with morbid and crass humor. The anonymous author of *ShavedLongCock* was now just another trustworthy cop doing a tough job and trying to make the best of it. Moreover, *ShavedLongCock*’s status as a “cop blog” captured the attention of the city clerk. Thus the blog begins to operate on the level of citywide management, containing racialized threats in order to secure the well-regulated movements of the general population. *ShavedLongCock* is not only no longer a racist blog but instead a race-less protector of a threatened public.

By April 18, 2012, when the *Chicago Tribune* reported on the replacement of the original winning design with an in-house design, *ShavedLongCock* was also a law enforcement expert. The article briefly recapitulated the controversy’s history, writing, “The teen’s sticker contained depictions of upraised hands some law enforcement experts said may have been designed to imitate the hand signs of a notorious Chicago gang”

(Byrne 3). To be sure, Weis was likely one of the “law enforcement experts” referenced here, but the *Chicago Tribune* never cited any other law enforcement experts, and *Chicago Tribune* reporters only contacted Weis after initially reporting that the city sticker was felled by a “cop blog with a dirty name,” whose writer “saw ... similarities between hands the boy drew into his sticker and a hand sign associated with a gang.” This story thus folded *ShavedLongCock* into the category of “law enforcement experts,” establishing the blog as a protector of urban circulation.

The movement from a blog about police issues to a cop blog and finally to a law enforcement expert was similar in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The initial February 8, 2012 story described *ShavedLongCock* as a “blog popular with Chicago cops” (Janssen and Spielman 4). The story detailing the replacement of the winning design with an in-house design lumped the blog in with “former Supt. Jody Weis and other critics” (Janssen and Spielman 5). This transference of credibility from the police and legal experts to *ShavedLongCock* functioned through omission. The blatant and virulent racism of the blog was never cited, described, or acknowledged. Instead, the blog was simply “about police issues” or a “cop blog.” By the time the articles reported on the findings of legal experts, *ShavedLongCock* had slipped, unacknowledged and unchallenged, into the reputable realm of law and order, protecting the public from threats to well-regulated urban circulation.

The reference to Weis was key to this process. His authority as former police superintendent, chief of the Chicago Crime Commission, and co-author of *The Chicago Gang Book*, a book expressly dedicated to preventing the circulation of gang rhetoric, consolidated the credibility of *ShavedLongCock* while further obscuring its racism. Thus

when *NPR* picked up the story on February 9, it could claim that “Weis and others also point out that [the contest winner’s] Facebook page—since taken down—had several gang-related photographs and comments” (Schaper 9). Here there was no reference to any blogs, but the “others” were *ShavedLongCock*, which was the source that initially pulled pictures from the design winner’s Facebook page, and *Second City Cop*, which linked to *ShavedLongCock* and mentioned that *ShavedLongCock*—not Weis—had found incriminating pictures on the design winner’s Facebook page. The fact that *CBS Local*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times* all credit *ShavedLongCock* as a police blog, and the fact that the *Chicago Tribune* quoted Weis, allowed *NPR* to cite the blog—perhaps unwittingly—without referring to it at all.

As I have demonstrated here, *ShavedLongCock* was cited while its racism was omitted. The fear of gang imagery and, by extension, the bodies of gang members moving in the urban milieu helped to generate the city sticker controversy. In this sense, the controversy tapped into an existing way of approaching urban circulation as part of a bounded network that can be mapped, managed, and controlled. In order to explain how the controversy articulated with extant approaches to the city, I now turn to the history of the notion of the urban milieu, the vision of a mappable network that makes both circulation and the management of circulation—or the enforcement of containment—possible.

The City Sticker and the Urban Milieu

The city sticker controversy exemplifies the ways in which bodies come to be marked as potentially violent and dangerous, and thus become objects of fear. As Darrel

Wanzer suggests, expanding McGee's fragmentation thesis requires attending to the ways in which circulation sustains "coloniality"—and I would add racialization—both of which are "constitutive features of Western modernity" (652). Circulation and racialization cohere in the notion of the urban milieu, which is central to modern urban planning. Circulation entails both movement and containment. Since the milieu is an interconnected space, threats, contagions, and other dangers to circulation must be contained so they do not impede the movement of other "healthy" elements in the circulatory system. Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, perhaps the best known urban planner in history, sought to ease the flow of capital and to contain the unruly working classes in mid-nineteenth-century Paris with his totalizing vision of urban space. Haussmann radically expanded the scale of urban planning, managing the "city (and even its suburbs) as a totality," or a milieu, "rather than a chaos of particular objects" (Harvey 13). One of the clearest effects of Haussmann's efforts was to "improve the capacity for the circulation of goods and people" in the city (Harvey 112). For the city to function as a working whole, capital, goods, and bodies must circulate throughout, and that which would interrupt this circulation must be contained within certain quarters. The interconnectedness of the urban milieu thus raises the stakes for managing circulation. These heightened stakes are at work in the city sticker controversy, where covert gang imagery threatens to contaminate not just ghetto neighborhoods but the city as a whole. Such threats call for containment.

Haussmann's totalizing vision and the notion of the milieu circulated far beyond Paris, inspiring Chicago's famous planner and architect Daniel Burnham, who toured Paris to learn about its system of order (Smith 14). Burnham, like other planners of the

time, approached the city as a chaos of individual parts that needed to be reshaped into a rationally ordered system (Boyer 48). The 1909 *Plan of Chicago* that Burnham co-authored with Edward H. Bennett states, “practical men of affairs are turning their attention to working out the means whereby the city may be made an efficient instrument for providing all its people with the best possible conditions of living” (quoted in Smith 1). The milieu—the efficient instrument—could be regulated through careful study and expert planning, providing, in the planners’ words, “healthgiving improvements of incalculable value to all citizens and the whole city” (quoted in Kling 257). The drive for hygiene combined with a fear of contagion from racial others in the city. Just as in Paris, where Haussmann sought to scour the “evil from the subterranean Paris sewers” and to demolish the “haunts of the dangerous classes” (Harvey 268), urban planners in Chicago linked immigrants and human waste under the sign of contagions and other “unhealthy hazards” to be contained or expelled (Smith xvi). As this focus on hygiene suggests, the interconnectedness of the milieu also opens the city and its citizens to the threat of contagion.

In the planning and managing of Chicago, the drive to contain racialized bodies has proven to be durable. Indeed, Chicago is, in many ways, the paradigm in the United States of racial segregation, which has been enforced through such institutional and structural practices as redlining and racial covenants (see Hirsch, Massey and Denton). Redlining relied upon the mapping of the city by race, creating a vision of the urban milieu that promoted the circulation of funds to certain neighborhoods considered desirable by virtue of their racial makeup and enforced the containment of people of color in undervalued and underserved neighborhoods. Although some of these practices were

later declared unenforceable, their effect was enduring, locking many cities into a pattern of segregation sustained by the vision of the urban milieu (Massey and Denton 55).

However, the Chicago Housing Authority did begin in 2000 to implement its Plan for Transformation, which involves providing vouchers for the private market for public-housing residents and razing the sort of high-rise projects that Le Corbusier, who sought to update Haussmann's urban vision, mistakenly predicted would resolve urban clutter and chaos and promote healthy circulation in the urban milieu. The bodies materially and symbolically attached to those projects and the contaminants purportedly emanating from them, such as the "welfare queen" and "the crack epidemic," became targets of racial fear that called for containment. Indeed, the CHA chose to demolish these projects in no small part because of their negative symbolic force. However, initial research into the Plan indicates that the "increasingly stringent criteria for voucher use" and the lack of landlords accepting the vouchers has restricted residents' options for securing new housing and steered them toward low-income areas, all while promoting the gentrification of the former sites of projects such as Cabrini-Green, which was located between the wealthy Lincoln Park and Gold Coast neighborhoods (Vale and Graves 25). In other words, despite its good intentions, the Plan has in practice further entrenched racial segregation. This is why it is important that the citation-by-omission of *ShavedLongCock*—the work of a malignly racist blog—elevated the blog's discourse to the level of city-wide management: even when well-intentioned people seek to combat the historical effects of racialized policies, ideas, and actions, the ongoing history of the urban milieu continues to promote the containment of bodies of color in the city.

Within these ghettoized spaces built by nearly a century of a combination of purposeful planning, blatant neglect, and well-intended yet ineffective reform, the city continues to develop tools to map the movements of bodies. Building on research the sociologist Andrew Papachristos and others have conducted into “the salience of social networks on differential risks of gunshot injury” (Papachristos et al. 993), the Chicago Police Department in 2013 launched a pilot program using real-time crime data to map criminal social networks, aggregating the data to rank “thousands of Chicagoans according to their chances of being involved as either victim or offender in a murder” and to map the location of gang territories and disputes (Reel 44). The Chicago Police Department now distributes flyers to individual residents informing them that they rank as likely to be involved in murders. This practice is meant to deter crime and indeed to save lives, but it sustains a circulatory system that relies on mapping to manage the movement of bodies in the urban milieu. By tracing how suspicious bodies “resonate together” in criminal networks, these CPD maps attempt to prevent crime from “going viral” and spreading contagion in the urban milieu (Parikka 270). The CPD’s maps are symbolic forms that enable particular practices of managing material space. Symbols also come to be tied to particular spaces and the bodies that move through them. In other words, imagery articulates to bodies, symbolic representation reinforcing material formations of space. This big data project, which uses the digital network to manage the urban milieu, is another example of how new practices fold into old histories. The history of racial formations and their contemporary ramifications thus reveal the ways in which racialization and circulation are both ongoing processes. The unequally shared set of

resources for regulating urban circulation have altered over time, but the containment of certain bodies in order to promote the movement of others has continued.

The city sticker controversy was therefore a new problem with old roots. The urban milieu and the digital network are both powerful circulatory systems that are perceived as vulnerable to infection precisely because of their power to encourage movement. Circulation thus entails both movement and the regulation of movement, flow and containment. In the city sticker controversy, both sides of circulation are at work. The design contest was initially an effort to showcase the talent of Chicago youth by allowing their artistry to circulate on city vehicles. But this showcase for talent turned into a threat of contagion when the articulation between youth of color and gang membership was secured. The designer and, by extension, his design, then crossed the line separating “angelic teen and ravenous ‘thug’” (McCann 493). In the city, the ghetto is the most powerful symbol of potential infection and thus the most entrenched material embodiment of containment. A reflection on the city sticker controversy in the *Chicago Magazine* suggested that the reality of ghettoization is that “some people are simply caught up in the milieu” of gang violence (Moser 14). This notion of being “caught up in the milieu” draws on two widespread assumptions about cities in the United States. One is that certain racialized bodies are predisposed to violence. The second and related assumption is that the milieu is something one can get “caught up in.” To prevent contaminating the healthy circulation of the city, the ghetto must be tracked, mapped, and contained—symbolically and materially—to prevent it from spreading and infecting the city. In short, the ghetto must be folded into a cartography of power. The city sticker

controversy, then, is one manifestation of a racial formation that calls for and enforces the containment of bodies of color in the urban milieu.

Contagious Rhetoric: Gangs in the City

Gang members are the most feared and most mobile product of the ghetto. In the United States, dominant discourses tend to associate people of color with gang membership. Indeed, “in the 1960s, gangs became synonymous with minority populations—typically African Americans and Latinos living in the poorest, inner-city neighborhoods” (Coughlin and Venkatesh 51). The rhetorical productions of gangs trouble circulation in the city. Gang rhetoric lends itself to the borrowing, copying, and circulating of their rhetoric. In other words, because it is not always clear what defines a gang, the gang and its symbolism can potentially circulate throughout the urban milieu, contaminating areas beyond the inner city.

This lack of clarity is clearly at work in the city sticker controversy. Recall former police superintendent Weis’s uncertainty when he “saw the imagery on a Blackberry” that gave way to the claim that “It’s very, very close to a gang sign” after he blew the image up on his iPad (Dardick and Byrne 10). In neither case was Weis absolutely sure that the image is a gang sign, but since it is not always clear what defines a gang, and since the articulation between urban youth of color and gang membership is so strong, “very close” is enough to justify the accusation. Like the insalubrious habits of the

working classes in Haussmann's era and the infectious immigrants in Burnham's, contemporary street gangs pose a threat to ordered circulation in the city.

Containing gangs is a central focus of the Chicago Crime Commission, a nonprofit organization that works "toward improving the criminal justice system in Chicago by creating and supporting solutions to crime" in part through the annual publication of the *Chicago Gang Book* (Chicago Crime Commission). Weis was chief of the Chicago Crime Commission from August 2011 to March 2012, and one of the authors of the *Chicago Gang Book*. The book sets out to combat gangs by providing its readers with the analytical tools it deems necessary to discover gang affiliation in bodily comportment, fashion choices, and media use, including graffiti, YouTube, and Facebook. In other words, the book offers a means of attaching a set of symbols to the body. It does so by listing information on gang members, gang locations, and gang imagery, but this effort quickly undermines itself. In addition to associating now common (if initially gang-related) phrases like "What up, G?" with particular gangs, the book identifies gang colors such as blue, light blue, dark blue, purple, yellow, black, white, and red, associating each color with multiple gangs. The book describes sportswear associated with gangs, again with overlaps among gangs. Teams that purportedly double as gang symbols include the Seattle Mariners, Kansas City Chiefs, Kansas City Royals, Duke Blue Devils, North Carolina Tar Heels, Washington Redskins, New York Jets, Alabama Crimson Tide, St. Louis Cardinals, Philadelphia Eagles, Minnesota Vikings, and—this again in the *Chicago Gang Book*—the Chicago Bulls and the Chicago Blackhawks. Given this list of common colors and sports teams, it seems almost impossible *not* to deploy gang symbolism. Of course, the editors of the *Chicago Gang*

Book offer a disclaimer in fine print, assuming “no responsibility for any inaccuracies contained herein or for the identification of any individuals ... as members of any reputed criminal enterprise” (Davis et al. 1). Indeed, a *WGN* investigation reported numerous inaccuracies (“Investigation”). The fine-print disclaimer, however, is visually overwhelmed by what follows it in the book: full-page glossy reproductions of letters from law enforcement officials, all on official letterhead, and all of them endorsing the book and its editors. Then, the accusations ensue: page after page presents mug shots of people of color who are identified by name, date of birth, and alleged gang affiliation. The only evidence cited is a blanket claim in the introduction that all information in the book comes from “law enforcement and related sources” (Davis et al 1). Although this statement fails completely as a source list, it does reveal at least one fact: the wide circulation of gang rhetoric casts a wide net of suspicion, and people of color in the city are always already tied to potential gang membership.

Despite its highly problematic methodology, the *Chicago Gang Book* identifies a relevant pattern to gang rhetoric when it notes, “gangsters use social media to claim virtual turf” (Davis et al 221). Facebook posts and YouTube videos can stake similar claims as graffiti sprayed on brick buildings, making it even easier for gang rhetoric to move and be appropriated. The various appropriations of gang rhetoric point to a paradox: by definition, gangs are exclusive groups. Yet they remain purposefully permeable. Gangs might congregate on a certain street, but their rhetoric always moves throughout the city and, in digital form, throughout the world, making it available for copying and commodification. Given the wide circulation of this rhetoric, false

accusations of the sort the *Chicago Gang Book* absolves itself of are easy to make and difficult to avoid.

To be a person of color in public space is “already to be under suspicion” (Giroux 178). As the Chicago city sticker controversy unfolded in the spring of 2012, panic over gangs reached a fever pitch, leading Mayor Rahm Emanuel to declare, “The gangbangers and the gangs do not own this city—we do!” (Dumke 15). As Emanuel’s statement reveals, the fear of gangs extends to a fear of urban space itself—or at least to certain locations within the urban milieu, those ghettoized locations of potential violence, crime, and danger.

Since gangs attempt to claim turf, owning the city entails exerting the right to move freely through the city’s turf, unimpeded by gangs. In this sense, covert gang imagery on the car of every city of Chicago driver would stake a claim on the city’s most important circulatory system—its complex network of streets and highways—for gangs. Clerk Susana Mendoza adumbrated the significance of the street system when she congratulated the design winner in a televised interview by saying, “Your design will be on 1.3 million cars in the city of Chicago” (Cooper). The threat that the city sticker could pose haunts this celebration of citywide circulation. Perceived as a winning design produced by a promising Chicago youth, the sticker was a welcome addition to the city’s circulatory system. But when the Latino designer was accused of gang membership, the fear of racialized bodies moving unimpeded in the urban milieu changed the dominant interpretations of the design. The controversy erupted because of extant fears of ghetto violence spreading beyond its borders, circulating symbolically on the streets in the form of a sticker design. Although the racism that accompanied this fear was initially overt on

ShavedLongCock, its subsequent omission from mainstream media sources suggests both the close relationship between the urban milieu and racialization and the difficulties of attending to contemporary racial formations. The city sticker controversy became a controversy because it was framed—and the blog cited—in a context of an ongoing circulatory system that contains racialized bodies as potential threats.

This example of a racist blog attaining credibility through omission is thus more than a mere oversight. By transferring the credibility of law and order to a racist, anonymous blog, this citation-by-omission extends the pervasive fear of racialized bodies as always *potentially* violent and dangerous. It does not matter whether the design *actually* deploys gang symbols. All that matters is that it *might*, and the reason it might is because a young Latino boy created it. This is evident from official statements from Clerk Mendoza's statement to the *Chicago Tribune*:

“For me, as the clerk, it's not an issue of the individual at all, frankly,” Mendoza said. “It's an issue of the *perception that's now out in the city of Chicago* and, frankly, nationally, that we have a city sticker that some experts believe may provide *symbolism related to gangs*.” Emphasis added. (Byrne and Gerner 5)

To be sure, Mendoza, who elsewhere has described her own upbringing amid gang violence, claims not to associate the young boy with the effect his drawing has had. Unfortunately, she does not have to: the mainstream uptake of *ShavedLongCock*, which positions the blog as a mouthpiece of law and order, and the long history of practices dedicated to containing racialized bodies in the urban milieu, does so for her. The potentiality for gang symbolism in the design was linked to the potentiality of violence,

danger, and fear that accompanies racialized bodies. Thus even the *perception* that gang rhetoric might be circulating “out in the city of Chicago” is enough to revoke the prize. But blaming the city for its handling—or mishandling—of the controversy misses the point. The link between racialized bodies and violence was forged before the controversy erupted, and the fear of those bodies circulating in the urban milieu had already established the framing—or, in Omi and Winant’s terms, the racial formation—required to revoke the prize in the name of public safety. *ShavedLongCock* revels in this articulation between racialized bodies and violence, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *CBS Local* reinforce it through their failure to acknowledge the racism of the blog, and Mendoza accedes to it.

Conclusion

The city sticker controversy reveals how mobile fragments, including gangs, ghettos, and the urban milieu articulate with one another to consolidate formations of power. The relationship between racialization and circulation is key to this process. The fear of people of color as potentially dangerous extends to a fear of their potential dominance of the city itself, which is understood as a space occupied by people of color and thus as a space of potential violence and danger. The city sticker is placed on cars, which then move through the city. Using the vehicle sticker is a citywide requirement. The infiltration of gang symbols into the city sticker would thus entail the circulation of gang violence—and of racial contaminants—throughout the urban milieu.

The city sticker controversy provides one example of the ways in which symbolic and material networks of digital media articulate with the circulation of bodies, goods,

and capital within the city. These processes, practices, and logics of circulation challenge rhetoricians to attend to the ongoing histories of networked articulations. After all, the media did not accept *ShavedLongCock*'s interpretation of the city sticker because of the blog's powers of persuasion. In this case, the available means of persuasion were not deployed by *ShavedLongCock* but embedded in the history of racialization and circulation in Chicago. As the city sticker controversy demonstrates, rhetoric can exert force without directly persuading or influencing.

Attending to McGee's fragmentation thesis through an analysis of circulation reveals that circulation both fragments and consolidates, places objects in motion and impedes movement, remakes cultures and reactivates entrenched histories. Conducting rhetorical inquiry in a fragmented, diffuse, and decentered cultural and media environment thus calls for renewed attention to the articulation among elements as they circulate in global networks and urban milieus. A cartography of power offers both a method for tracing the contours of fragments as they articulate in formation and a name for the ways in which power gathers force. Cartographies are recursive. They appropriate and rearticulate extant fragments and formations. I have argued that urban space and race are significant both for the city sticker controversy and for rhetorical inquiry in general. This is so not only because *ShavedLongCock* is racist, or even because race and space are simultaneously symbolic and material, as rhetoricians have convincingly argued, but also because space and race activate, alter, and articulate with a wide range of ideas, institutions, and practices, all of which have deep histories that continue to resonate in the present.

Notes

¹ Officially, this is because the city now sells city stickers year round, but this official rationale has done little to quell speculation that avoiding another controversy was the primary motive. See Balde.

² The *ShavedLongCock* post that first sparked the controversy is no longer available online. Either through hacker interference or a Blogspot error, all of the posts before February 10, 2012 were lost from the *ShavedLongCock* archive, including the original post on the city sticker. Nevertheless, I have been able to reconstruct the post (which I originally accessed and read on February 8, 2012). A poster on a yelp.com forum pasted the entire text of the original post including the original image captions into a comment, and I located the images from the original post on the image hosting website imgur.com.

³ There is not space to cover *Second City Cop* in detail here, but its routine critiques of political correctness both obscure and advance racialized discourse. For example, in a post that Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis entitled, “Karen the Commie Goes Batshit Crazy,” the blog writes, “Evidently, [Lewis is] a fellow traveler with Attorney General Eric Holder, spouting off about racism and demanding an honest conversation, all while accusing anyone who actually brings up uncomfortable facts, figures, statistics and studies of ... you guessed it ... racism! As to the ‘rich white people’ knowing better, we’ll just mention that whatever they’re doing in the majority white ethnic enclaves across Chicago, Cook County and Illinois...well, it seems to be working. Crime rates there are lower, employment is higher, median income is better, neighborhoods are cleaner, more of their offspring go to college.”

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